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'USS Honduras' put in harm's way

By PHILIP SHEPHERD

THE LOWEST priority for current U.S. policy toward Honduras is Honduras.

The Reagan Administration's policies there focus not on goals for Honduras itself but on interests and objectives the United States has elsewhere — particularly in Nicaragua and El Salvador. To put it bluntly, Honduras is doing President Reagan's dirty work in Central America.

The Reagan Administration neither understands the social reality of Honduras nor cares about the country except as it can be used as a springboard for counterrevolution and U.S. military intervention in the region. To make Honduras its key geopolitical ally in Central America, the United States has adroitly played on Honduras's dependence and friendship, taking advantage of its traditional fears about its security — particularly vis-a-vis El Salvador, with whom it fought a disastrous four-day war in 1969.

Thus pressured, Honduras's civilian-military leadership has leased its weak but strategically placed nation to the United States. It has become, in effect, the USS Honduras, a sort of land-locked aircraft carrier. In return, the United States has promised large-scale economic and military aid to the country.

U.S. policy in Honduras has two main objectives. First, Honduras has been recruited into the Reagan Administration's effort to intimidate and destabilize Nicaragua — an effort aimed at eventually forcing a "rollback" of the Nicaraguan revolution and, by extension, according to the Reagan

logic, checking Cuban and Soviet power. Honduras's role, then, is to be the geopolitical key to U.S. counterrevolutionary strategy in Central America.

Filling that role requires specific activities. These include training Salvadoran and possibly other nations' military forces in Honduras for U.S. fiscal or political reasons; providing cover and a logistical base for the contras' not-so-secret covert action against Nicaragua; a rapid Honduras military buildup to support these operations; hosting joint maneuvers with the United States, neatly bypassing congressional approval for military aid to the region by accepting large amounts of military hardware and supplies that the Administration simply never withdraws; and providing training bases and a starting point for U.S. land, sea, and

airborne missions to intimidate Nicaragua and the Salvadoran guerrillas, essentially preparing for a regional war that seems more and more probable each day.

Second, because of the continued stalemate in the Salvadoran government's conflict with the guerrillas, Honduras increasingly has been drafted into support of the counterinsurgency struggle there. This involves the interdiction of supplies allegedly shipped to guerrillas from Nicaragua through or over Honduran territory, the ongoing Honduran cooperation with the Salvadoran army in sealing off the border to

prevent guerrillas from using the rough Honduran countryside as a staging base, the training of Salvadoran troops in Honduras by U.S. military advisers, and the containment of refugees.

Ignoring Honduran interests, Reagan policies already have had a variety of disastrous effects including heightened regional instability, terrorist attacks on Honduras, pillage by the CIA-backed contras, marginalization of Honduran civilian leadership, increased internal repression and human-rights abuses, and severe economic deterioration. All these factors postpone urgently needed socioeconomic reforms. While these developments have resulted from a complex interplay among Reagan policies, internal Honduran political and economic dynamics, and events elsewhere in Central America, ill-advised U.S. policies have been the single most important factor.

The likelihood that much of this could have been avoided makes the situation all the more tragic. Honduras's history has differed in important ways from that of its neighbors El Salvador, Guatemala, and Nicaragua. Despite its extreme poverty and domination by *caudillo* ("boss") politics — deplorable even by Central American standards — Honduras so far has largely escaped the violence that has engulfed other nations in the region. Hence the myth of Honduras as an "Oasis of Peace."

Unfortunately, much of this Honduran exceptionalism has been severely eroded; more and more, Honduras resembles its neighbors wracked by violence and crisis. Indeed, what we are witnessing in Honduras is the early stages of the "Salvadorization" of Honduran politics. Reagan policies toward Honduras have contributed significantly to this closing off of political space and dialogue. Moreover, by over-identifying Honduras with U.S. designs in the region, current U.S. policies risk destroying the Honduran government's legitimacy at home and abroad as well as inciting a nationalist backlash against the United States.

In sum, these policies threaten not only to undermine traditionally close U.S.-Honduran relations, but also to create yet another source of instability, turmoil, and violence in Central America. The ouster of Honduran military leader Gen. Gustavo Alvarez Martinez earlier this year by fellow military officers clearly has bought Honduras some sorely needed time; but if current Reagan policies continue, then only the form and not the substance of the U.S.-Honduran relationship will change. One cannot expect a small, poor, highly-dependent nation single-handedly to bring the richest, most powerful country in the world back to a more-responsible course.

Time is running out in Honduras; the sense of urgency that is so palpable there needs to be conveyed abroad while the worst can still be avoided. If the Reagan Administration will not alter its policies, it will be up to Congress, the public, and other parties to seize the initiative and prevent still another Central American tragedy.

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